

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the plight of refugees around the world. This hearing comes at an important time when, we believe, the war on terror is challenging our commitment to refugee protection, the humanitarian needs of refugees far outweigh our appropriations, and refugees around the world are taking action and demanding freedom and a better way of life.

We concur with our colleagues about the negative effects of the material support provision on refugees who are fleeing terror for freedom and safety. We also concur that the basic needs of refugees are inadequately supported by the international community and encourage U.S. leadership to enlist greater commitments from other nations and to expand our own contributions.

I would like to focus my testimony on the 99.5 percent of the world's refugees who will never come to the United States or be resettled in another country, the 8 out of 11.5 million refugees who have been warehoused.

Mr. Chairman, it has been two years since USCRI launched its anti-warehousing campaign focusing on the forgotten rights in the 1951 Refugee Convention. For two years we have been saying that denying refugees the right to work, earn income, go to school, own property and move freely is wrong.

The 1951 Convention envisioned a refugee protection regime based on human rights principles, not a perpetual aid delivery system that functioned best when refugees were confined and dependent. We took a close look at the 1951 Convention and were surprised to find that the word 'camp' does not appear in the entire document. This makes sense. After all, when the Convention was written, who had been putting people in camps? Hitler and Stalin. So camps were not entertained as an enlightened humanitarian response.

But as time went on, camps became the most expedient way to deliver assistance to a large number of people in an emergency setting. Now, long after an emergency is over, refugees remain dependent on that aid delivery system. Fourteen years after Somali refugees fled to Kenya, many remain in Kakuma Camp. One refugee from Kakuma who USCRI

resettled in Vermont likened the camp to “a storage place where they kept human beings.”

Long after an emergency is over, a host government can refuse to let refugees move outside the camp, making camps places of permanent residence. As attention wanes on a particular population, so does donor commitment, leading to reduced food rations in camps where refugees have no right to cultivate land, trade or sell goods in local markets.

Twelve years after Burundian refugees fled to Tanzania, they are still unable to work or participate in local markets.

Host governments do not need to allow refugees to work or go to school as long as the international community will continue to house, feed and set up special programs. The Thai government has recently permitted Burmese refugees to take up vocational training activities inside the camps, but they are still not allowed to leave the camp premises or receive wages for their work. Refugee children who receive some education in the camps grow up without the hope of moving on to secondary education, without the hope of ever employing their knowledge.

The 200,000 Sudanese refugees from Darfur who have lived in camps in Chad for two years now are growing impatient with the stagnant nature of camp life. One refugee said “We are in prison. It is time to start thinking of a life beyond the camp.” Another refugee recently asked a reporter, “Are they going to leave us like this forever? Will we just rot here like our animals?”

Congressman Smith, we’re not saying that camps are bad. We’re saying that tying humanitarian assistance to camp residence is essentially requiring refugees to forfeit their basic human rights.

The good news is that we have overcome the conceptual hurdle. There is widespread agreement among assistance agencies, donor countries and a number of host governments that warehousing is wrong, that refugees deserve opportunities for self-sufficiency. Over 359 NGOs, human rights organizations, academics and notable individuals, including 6 Nobel laureates, have signed on to our Statement Calling for Solutions to End the Warehousing of Refugees, which is attached for the record.

The *World Refugee Survey* has been a major tool of the anti-warehousing campaign, providing key statistics on the situation of refugees around the world. For the first time last year we graded country performance vis-à-vis refugee rights. This helped focus our attention on countries with the most egregious record of violating refugee rights, as indicated in the attached list of best and worse countries for the record.

Since we started the anti-warehousing campaign, many refugees have decided to demand better protection and the ability to determine their own future.

The most publicized event was the violent eviction of 2,000 Sudanese in Cairo – who led a 3 month sit-in protesting the abrupt end to refugee status determinations for Sudanese asylum seekers – 28 died and hundreds injured. “I just wanted to live with dignity,” said one refugee whose daughter was killed by Egyptian police. “That is all I wanted.”

When a delegation from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) visited the largest Burmese refugee camp along the Thai border, refugee elders held up signs that read “We have been here long

enough.” Primary school children stood at attention and asked the delegation, “Think about our future.”

Refugees from Congo held a sit-in in front of UNHCR’s headquarters in the capitol city of Burundi protesting the requirement to go to insecure camps to get assistance. The refugees were afraid of moving into the camps because over 150 refugees in Gatumba Refugee Camp were massacred by rebels in a surge of ethnic violence in August 2004.

How has the international community responded to the protests demanding a better way of life? Despite widespread agreement on anti-warehousing principles, the international community continues to reinforce the status quo.

UNHCR has urged self-settled Congolese refugees in Burundi to move to camps in order to receive assistance. Just last Friday UNHCR sent a convoy of refugees from Bujumbura to a camp where they would be guaranteed assistance and more movement is expected to take place in the coming weeks.

Plans for the residual caseload of Burmese refugees in Tham Hin Camp who will not be resettled to the United States are another example of how the status quo is reinforced. The Thai government, together with UNHCR, has decided to build a new camp for the remaining Tham Hin population. The Swiss government has funded an engineer to lay out the land and make recommendations for its infrastructure.

How long will the remaining Tham Hin refugees live on international assistance in the new camp? We do not know the answer.

Today, we have a choice to make. We can make sure that refugees are able to exercise basic freedoms, or we can continue to perpetuate and support the status quo.

Last year, Congress took a step in the right direction by passing an amendment to the FY06 Foreign Operations Appropriations bill requesting the State Department to designate some of its funds to developing effective responses to protracted refugee situations, including programs to assist refugees outside of traditional camp settings that support refugees living or working in local communities. To

date, no funds have been directed toward this purpose and the status quo prevails.

The State Department insists that providing basic needs and services to refugees is a higher priority than helping refugees become self-reliant. But if we continue to do the former without investing in the latter, there will never be change.

What can be done? We can make sure that refugees are not destitute and dependent on meager assistance for years to come. We can begin today by asking governments to consider policy alternatives, such as local hosting arrangements for residual caseloads, linking each refugee with a sponsor or community organization.

As an interim step, governments could develop regional refugee empowerment zones where refugees would be free to live, move and work. We can invest money in local employers, schools and clinics rather than building isolated educational and medical structures in the camps which separate refugees from the larger society.



Or, in another ten years I can testify before you that millions of refugees continue to live in crowded conditions where they're not allowed to cultivate their own food or earn income from their labor. I could report ten years from now that refugees still live off of inadequate food rations; that blue tarps and white tents are still permanent homes for refugees; that we're still trucking in water and digging wells for refugees in inhospitable living conditions.

Then, would we still consider ourselves leaders in refugee protection? Will we have made the most of the trillion dollars in appropriated funds spent between now and then?

Mr. Chairman, I envision a better future. I envision a future in which the U.S. government and the international community have a clear policy delineating the type of assistance appropriate in emergencies verses long-term settings. Care and maintenance saves lives in the short term but only rights-based protection leading to self-reliance is acceptable.

I envision a future where host governments allow refugees work permits and access to local schools. I envision refugees becoming productive members of the society that has granted them temporary stay. While

they are yet refugees, they can live to their full potential, awaiting a durable solution with human and material resources to bring back to their home country when it is safe.

In short, Mr. Chairman, I envision a future in which a 55 year old law is respected and implemented.